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RR RUEHAG RUEHDF RUEHLZ
DE RUEHFT #4996 3270635
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 230635Z NOV 07
FM AMCONSUL FRANKFURT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3985
INFO RUCNFRG/FRG COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS FRANKFURT 004996

SIPDIS

SIPDIS SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [GM](#)
SUBJECT: Why Beck Stayed Home

Sensitive but unclassified; not for internet distribution.

REF: a) 07 Berlin 2060, b) 07 Frankfurt 3223

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Social Democratic Party (SPD) Chairman Kurt Beck has decided against taking the Vice Chancellorship left open by Labor Minister Franz Muentefering's surprise resignation (ref A). Beck will continue instead as Minister-President of the state of Rheinland-Pfalz (R-P). In the view of observers in R-P, Beck's decision will allow him to deal with the current state party leadership crisis. It may also put him a stronger position to campaign for the Chancellorship in 2009, since he will be insulated from the vicissitudes of coalition politics in Berlin. END SUMMARY.

Beck Stays outside the Grand Coalition

¶2. (SBU) SPD Party Chairperson and Rheinland-Pfalz (R-P) Minister President Kurt Beck decided not to take a cabinet position in Berlin following the November 13 resignation of SPD Labor Minister and Vice Chancellor Franz Muentefering. SPD contacts point to strategic advantages inherent in Beck's decision to remain in Rheinland-Pfalz. As Minister President, he is outside of -- and independent from -- the Grand Coalition federal government and does not always have to express his support for decisions taken by the federal cabinet. His immediate co-workers at the R-P State Chancellery also told Pol Specialist that Beck is used to being in a leadership role as Minister President, and would find it hard to be in a subordinate role under Chancellor Angela Merkel.

¶3. (SBU) Opposition figures predictably criticized Beck for not taking up federal office. R-P CDU leader Christian Baldauf attacked Beck for being "overburdened" with his double duties as SPD leader and Minister President. Hesse Minister President Roland Koch (CDU) told a local paper: "It is impossible to influence politics as an outsider. This decision reflects a lack of courage to take on responsibility." At the state convention of the Baden-Wuerttemberg CDU in Freiburg November 17, Bundestag members Thomas Bareiss and Gunther Krichbaum told Pol Specialist that they expect tensions within the Grand Coalition to increase, since Muentefering was always a reliable partner for Merkel.

Repairing Damage at Home

¶4. (SBU) Another reason for Beck's decision, according to Post contacts, is the crisis in his own state cabinet. Deputy Minister President (and Interior Minister) Karl Peter Bruch is accused of awarding a public relations campaign contract to a company owned by his son-in-law. Bruch was a likely successor to Beck as Minister President and one of his only close confidantes. Justice Minister Georg Bamberger is also facing criticism for allegedly violating hiring regulations in filling a position at the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz.

¶5. (SBU) Contacts in the R-P State Chancellery told Pol Specialist

that there was significant relief there over Beck's decision. The attacks on two cabinet members have damaged the image of the SPD government in R-P, which relies heavily on Beck's popular persona. An SPD caucus member told a local paper: "If Beck leaves now, everything will collapse." (Comment: While some contacts in R-P speculate that Beck might lack the ambition to go to Berlin or be undecided whether or not to be the party's chancellor candidate in 2009, his consolidation of power within the SPD and his performance at the October Hamburg national party convention seem to indicate the opposite. End comment.)

¶6. (SBU) R-P SPD contacts told Pol Specialist they expect Bruch to step down in early 2008 to avoid further damage to Beck and the SPD. The loss of such a close advisor would be a blow to Beck, who does not have an inner circle of supporters he could rely on if he were to assume federal office. Beck also now needs to rethink his succession plan in R-P, with no clear candidate in sight.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: While SPD contacts unanimously welcomed Beck's decision and saw it as a move that could strengthen his candidacy for the Chancellorship, some observers speculate that it may have drawbacks in the long run. One local paper contrasted him with former Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who left the Rheinland-Pfalz State Chancellery to become the CDU opposition leader in the federal parliament. By deciding to remain in Rheinland-Pfalz, Beck may retain more independence, but at the cost of reducing his opportunities to reach out to a broader national audience. END COMMENT.

¶8. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
POWELL